

Villagers reach for their cheque books to beat off 'Gucci gypsies'

By David Lister

THEY are the "Gucci Gypsies": well-off, well-dressed and never far from the latest top-of-the-range BMW or a glistening new 4x4.

Smart, savvy and, above all, well briefed by lawyers, their convoys of deluxe caravans have descended on up to 50 rural communities across England and Wales. And pretty soon they could be coming to a field near you.

"Jean" will never forget the first time she set eyes on them, as she drove past the pretty meadow near her house and noted with astonishment that a long queue of caravans appeared to be waiting to enter the field. At 4.50pm, just as the local council offices were closing for the weekend, a bulldozer began tearing out the hedge-row at one end of the meadow, a spot where poppies and wild flowers grow in summer and ramblers would often stop to savour the view of the mist-covered Bredon Hill beyond.

Within hours the two-acre field, in the village of Eckington, Worcestershire, was colonised by 16 caravans and the poppies flattened beneath 2,000 tonnes of gravel. But although the stress of the gypsies moving in was hard enough for "Jean" — who was too afraid to disclose her real name — it was not until the next day that the real shock came.

"As we were driving past on the Saturday we saw that one of them had a BMW, and he'd called out the BMW garage to fix his car," she told *The Times*. "These people claim they need to build on the land because of human rights, but the truth is they've more money than I have. They're not deprived — just take a look at the cars they drive and their caravans. I've never seen such nice caravans in all my life."

Although their purchase of the land was legal, the camp the gypsies built was in breach of planning laws — and although permission was subsequently refused by Wychavon District Council, they have launched appeals at every stage of the legal process.

The sight of outsiders coming in and flouting planning laws has been galling for local people. Since they arrived in May the gypsies have defied many of the stereotypes about traveller communities. Brand-new Volkswagen Golfs and 4x4s sit alongside the caravans, most of which have satellite dishes, while each individual plot has its own varnished front gate and letterbox.

The camp is not unlike a middle-class housing estate: there are swings and slides for the children, and even a wooden doll's house next to one caravan; several are surrounded by ornamental lanterns, benches, neat gardens and flower beds.

The Eckington story is typical of a new generation of gypsies sweeping rural Britain.

RICHARD PONLE

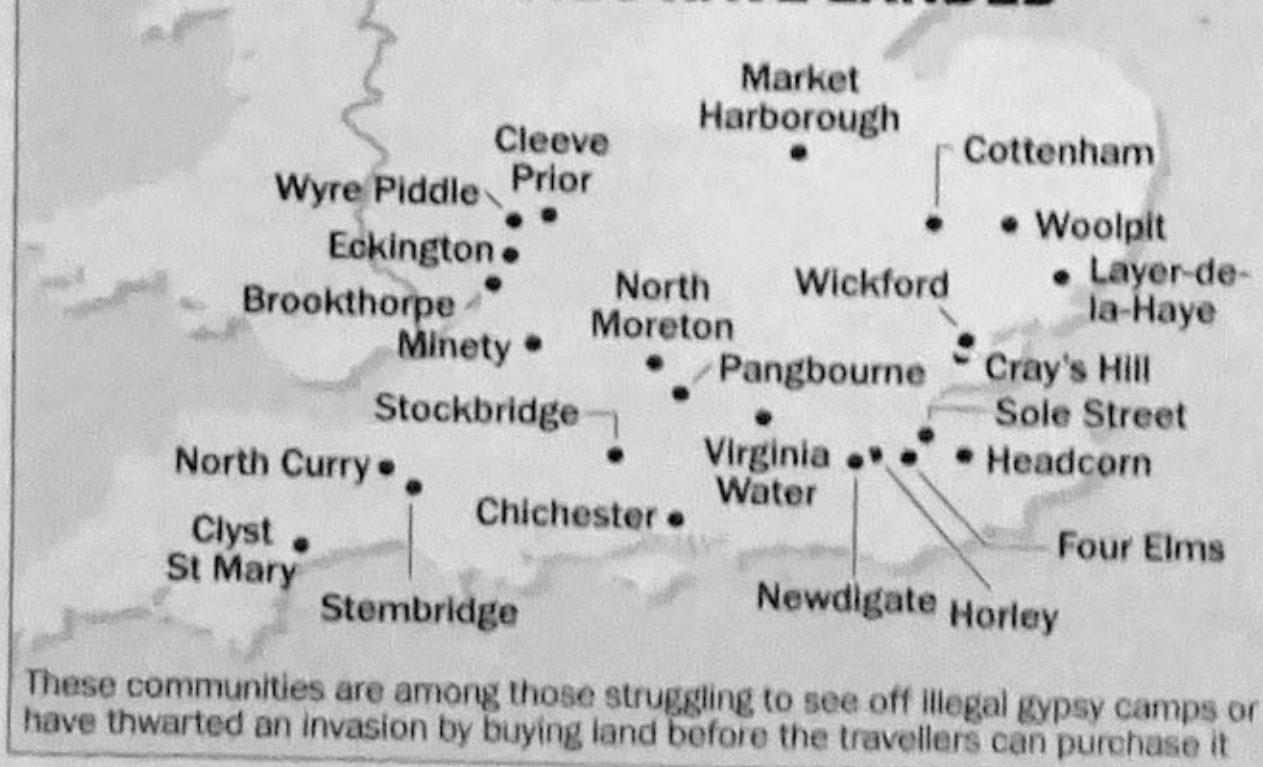


Caravan community: Charlotte Hughes and her five children live on land bought by gypsies near Eckington, in Worcestershire



Villagers in Newdigate blocked off a field to deter the gypsies

WHERE THE GYPSIES HAVE LANDED



Tony Blair acknowledged the scale of the problem this week when he told the House of Commons that the Government would grant councils new powers to halt illegal developments.

"They are not traditional travellers," said Terry Brownbill, co-founder of Middle England in Revolt, a group aimed at lobbying the Government to reform its policies on gypsies. "They are well dressed, well heeled and quite often well

oiled. They are the Gucci Gypsies." Among the hamlets and villages of rural England, fear is running so high about the ability of gypsies to snap up land that residents are clubbing together to thwart them. But while unused farmland used to sell for next to nothing, the extra competition means that the cost of doing this is starting to escalate out of control.

Some observers believe that a new class of gypsy property dealer is emerging, making

money by buying up prime areas of farmland and increasing its value by fighting through the courts until they win retrospective planning permission.

It may be too late in Eckington, but elsewhere the revolt is gathering steam. Despite rising land values, over the past week alone residents in four villages have raised enough money to make sure that they can resist "invasion" by travellers.

In Newdigate, Surrey, a pile of concrete boulders yesterday blocked the entrance to a small field where gypsies had threatened to move in. The village's problems began when the land was sold at a horse fair in Ireland, apparently in return for a second-hand car and a small amount of cash. But despite selling for such a paltry amount, some 63 villagers raised £50,000 to buy the one-acre plot — compared to a market price of £3,000 — after rumours that 16 caravans were waiting to roll on to the land.

In another Surrey village, Virginia Water, nine residents raised £210,000 to stop a one-acre field falling into gypsy hands. A group of 50 villagers stumped up £100,000 for a swath of land outside Market Harborough, Leicestershire, while in Kent 40 residents were hoping to salvage a deal to pay £147,000 for a seven-acre plot in the hamlet of Sole Street, near Meopham. The real value of the land is £30,000.

The feud between gypsies and Middle England exploded last year when 800 travellers set up camp on the edge of Cottenham, Cambridgeshire, and invoked their human rights to stay on the site. Villagers were so exasperated that they took the law into their own hands

and stopped paying council tax. The villagers claim that as well as settling illegally, the gypsies, who last week won an order preventing their eviction, have sparked a local crime wave.

According to Rick Bristow, chairman of the Cottenham Residents Association, since Britain accepted the European Convention on Human Rights in 1998, the battle between local councils and gypsies has swung in favour of the gypsies. "Until 1994 there was a statutory duty on local councils to provide public sites, but in 1994 that was repealed by John Major's Government and replaced with a discretionary duty on local authorities."

"Local authorities decided to ignore it, but in 1998 we signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights and that's when it started to turn. Clever lawyers, some of them signed up to legal aid, decided to represent the travellers and invoked human rights legislation to defend them," he said.

But not everybody hates the gypsies. In Eckington they have embarked on a charm offensive to show that they are not criminals. They have had the parish vicar round, and the local primary school headmistress has written to them saying that they promote learning through "cultural diversity". "We're not criminals or law breakers," says Charlotte Hughes, 29, who has five children. "I can't read very well but I'm not ashamed of who I am."

Should the Government get tough on gypsies?

Send your e-mails to debate@thetimes.co.uk